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A contrastive analysis of some phonological, morphological, and syntactical differences existing in French and English are cited along with suggestions for teaching each variation by the systematic approach. Also discussed briefly are such language interference problems as auditory discrimination of segmental and supra-segmental phonemes, placement of the French adjective and direct object, and formation of plurals. (AF)

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APPLIED FRENCH LINGUISTICS

One of the basic postulates of modern linguistic science is that language is systematic, each language having its unique system of sounds, forms, and syntactic patterns. The French language can no more be analyzed as if it fell under some kind of "universal grammar," such as Latin, than can English. Moreover, in teaching French as a foreign language, one must be constantly aware of the problem of interference from the system of the native language. It is helpful in this respect to compare the native language of the learner--in our case English--with the target language to be studied--in our case French--so that we may prepare for the major difficulties to be encountered.

The building blocks of French are different from those of English, and practically all mistakes made by a learner of a foreign language are due to his natural inclination to equate the grammatical elements of the native with those of the foreign language. The unique structure of every language may be illustrated by examples from French, showing how the French system of phonology, morphology, and syntax differs significantly from that of English. We may thereby gain clearer perspective of what is meant by a "linguistic system" in its various components. We may also better understand how applied linguistics helps us to recognize those elements of the foreign language which are made especially difficult by interference coming from the native language and to construct appropriate and systematic teaching materials pertaining to these problems.

Taking each major component of the French linguistic system in turn, we shall now explore some of the differences which make the French system unique. To begin with, the student of French has two entirely new sounds to learn which, at first, he can neither pronounce nor hear: they are /ɲ/ as in agneau, and /ɥ/ as in rue. This represents a learning problem which linguists call "auditory discrimination," which means that the student must learn to hear and to articulate these sounds as phonemes different from each other and from all other phonemes of the language.

There are three ways to teach new sounds. One is to have the student imitate the sound after the teacher, who usually will pronounce the sound in the context of a word: agneau, montagne, and compagne, for the one sound; and rue, du, and su, for the other sound. The second is to describe the articulation of the sounds according to the sound type and place of articulation: /ɲ/ is an alveo-palatal nasal, and /ɥ/ is an alveo-palatal oral. The third is to learn auditory

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discrimination through the use of what linguists call "minimal pairs." Minimal pairs exist in a language when two words are exactly alike in sound except for one phoneme which makes the words distinctly different in sound structure and in meaning, as in English pin--pen or pit--pick, which we might transcribe phonemically /pɨn/--/pen/, /pɨt/--/pɨk/. Similarly, minimal pairs in French are useful for teaching auditory discrimination: as in the series rue--roue, du--doux, su--sou.

These examples illustrate the unique phonemic system of each language and how the sound structure of a language works in its minimal contrasts. We might appreciate now why linguists abhor the teaching of pronunciation of a foreign language as if its sounds were the same as those of English, as may be seen, for example, in the widely disseminated Berlitz manuals, the I. A. Richards texts, and the Mario Pei series of language books found in every drug store.

So far we have discussed the segmental phonemes of French and English and how they differ in the language systems. There are many interesting differences, too, in the system of supra-segmental phonemes, that is, the phonemes of pitch, stress, and juncture. The most striking feature of the French intonation system is the lack of phonemic stress. In English, conversely, stress is of great importance and may be seen in its four degrees in the example often used by linguists: lîghthoûse kêepĕr versus lîght hóusekèèpĕr. The operation of phonemic stress may also be seen in such minimal pairs as cóntrȁct and cŏntráct. In French, however, all syllables of a word have equal stress, except at the end of an intonation contour where there is a heavier, but non-phonemic, stress on the last syllable. It is not possible, therefore, in French to make a phonemic distinction, as we do in English, between the phrases thĕ Frénch têachĕr and thĕ Frênch téachĕr. It must be done in another way--through syntax: le professeur de français and le professeur français. This is an excellent example for students to see how strikingly different linguistic systems must be used to convey the same idea.

Since we have just mentioned syntax as a second component of language structure, we might continue with one more example of the difference between the French and the English systems on this same level. In English the placement of the direct object in basic sentence patterns is after the verb: as in I see him. But in French the order is Subject-Direct Object-Verb: Je le vois. Because of the influence of the English pattern, however, students will tend to compose ungrammatical sentences, such as Je vois le or Je vois il, and they must be taught to think, according to French syntax, of

the direct object first and then the verb. A similar teaching problem is the placement of the French adjective after the noun. The English pattern will often interfere and influence students to make constructions such as la rouge voiture and les intéressants livres.

Our final structural component is morphology, and here again we can see how the French system is unique. Our example will be noun plurality in terms of the spoken language. In English one determines the number of a noun by listening for the final inflectional morpheme added to the base form of a noun: the boy versus the boys. In French, however, rather than listening for an inflectional suffix, the student must condition himself to listen for the form of the definite article which precedes the noun: le garçon versus les garçons. The English inflectional morpheme for possession will also intrude when a student uses le garçon's livre instead of the French syntactic structure le livre du garçon. The different ways of making gender and number agree in French and English are apparent, too, when students say mon livres (my books) and sa père (her father).

It is possible, of course, to learn a foreign language without knowing anything about its linguistic system. Linguistic science, however, has provided us with an analysis of languages useful to the teacher in pinpointing learning problems and motivating to the student in that it shows him that language is systematic and that he must master the system if he is to learn efficiently. Linguistics has shown us there is nothing vague, mysterious, or impressionistic about language learning; and even though a student may not achieve much facility in his use of a foreign language, he may in his education at least come to appreciate the great principle that distinguishes human language from animal cries: language is systematic, each language having its unique system of sounds, forms, and syntactic patterns.

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[Miss Sturm, teacher of French at James Madison H.S., presented the foregoing in longer form at an in-service conference on "Language" for the teachers of the Falls Church public schools last spring.]

A teacher asked his students to identify "billet doux" as one item in a quiz on The Rape of the Lock. One of the wilder swings at the target was "double bed."